

THE ROLE OF BLACK IN AMERICAN FILM

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Abstract: Penelitian ini adalah tentang peran orang kulit hitam dalam film Amerika pada masa perbudakan. Film merupakan sebuah budaya populer *popular culture* yang dapat memperlihatkan perkembangan budaya suatu masyarakat. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan interdisipliner yaitu pendekatan sejarah, sosiologi, budaya dan sastra. Anggapan orang kulit putih bahwa ras orang kulit hitam adalah rendah menyebabkan hubungan antara kedua ras tersebut sering bermusuhan. Hubungan yang saling bertentangan tersebut, terlihat dari peran orang kulit hitam dalam film Amerika pada masa perbudakan. Hasil penelitian ini memperlihatkan bahwa peran orang kulit hitam dalam film Amerika pada masa perbudakan sering diberikan konsep-konsep negatif seperti orang pemalas, bodoh, tidak jujur, pembunuh, dan peramal. Karakter dan peran orang kulit hitam dalam film-film Amerika pada masa perbudakan, digambarkan dalam bentuk karikatur-karikatur anti-terhadap orang kulit hitam seperti karikatur *Toms, Coons, Tragic Mulattos, Mammies* dan *Bad Bucks*. Setelah masa persamaan hak, peran orang kulit hitam dalam film Amerika sudah mulai berubah. Mereka sudah sering muncul di televisi dan di media-media hiburan.

Kata Kunci : Film, stereotip, diskriminasi, inferior, superior

INTRODUCTION

Film in America was invented in 1888 in the form of motion pictures. According to Americana Encyclopedia, Motion Pictures, a series of still photograph each slightly different from the other, projected in sequence onto a screen, giving the illusion of continuous movement. Other names for motion pictures are *movies, moving picture, cinema, and films*. (Encyclopedia M-553). At that time, the function of motion picture can be a medium of the entertainments, a form of communication, a historical, an art form, and a tool for scientific research.

Since then American motion pictures had developed as an important part of American popular culture. Furthermore in the twentieth century American film industry flourished. Film in American popular culture influence cultural changes in American society. Film combine with other cultural factors such as radio, television, and advertising, all together changed the American life style. " But film can also be philosophized about on the assumption that they

are everyday objects, thing we encounter in our everyday experience that begin somehow to confound us when we reflected on them.....Film then function like the concrete examples philosophers have always used to illustrate their conception of virtue, vice, or political and social interaction." (Wartenberg 7)

Film is also a medium of mass culture informing the society about the cultural development. A film show cultural and social values of the society. Therefore from the American film we can see the development of American society at a certain period such as their life style, habits, family pattern or social system as whole.

America is known as the Democracy country where all the men of their society are equal. We can see from the American's Declaration of Independence statement as American principle and American philosophy, based mainly on Jefferson's concept about democracy, that is: "we hold these truth to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain

unalienable right, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." (Luedtke : 223)

While Robert Blauner a sociologist say that, America built base on the principle that the America will become the white's country. (31). From this sentence we can conclude that America has been dominated by the white's superiority, and black will be lower or *second class*.

The relationship between Black and White has shown the negative things, such as racial discrimination and segregation. Racial means that some race groups think that they are superior to the other race groups or some race groups exploited another group. Racism also appeared social phenomena in American society.

According to Joe R. Feagin the social definition of race "A racial group is not something that is naturally generated as part of the natural order of the universe but is a social category that person outside the set – part group have decided important to single out on the basis of real or alleged physical traits which are subjected selected". And then he continued black Americans have been defined as racially different by white groups for several centuries on the basis of certain physical characteristics, such as skin color and hair type, presume to be unchangeable (Feagin:115)

Based on these phenomena we can see that, the role of black in American society still unfair, such as black and white in American film. As we can see the role of black in American film always not balance on white, where the placement of black is different from white. Consequently white attenuates black position in film. For example in film *Knock Out* (1990), this film is about the competition two woman boxer between White woman and Black woman. This film showed that White woman has been fall down four times, but the end of the competition the winner is White woman.

Many Blacks in American film whatever kind of film the role of Black always exploited by White and Black gain the second nomination. And also the contradiction of govern Black film will be evident as James Monaco state that " If Black actors were successful box-office

draws,.....then white directors moved to exploit their talents in essentially white films. If Black themes drew large audience, white producers moved in to share in the receipts," (Monaco : 190)

Relating to the explanation above, the discrimination of Black in American film become the main focus that will be analyze in this paper. As Advisory Commission on Civil Disorder say that, Discrimination and segregation have long permeated much of American life... (1). So, How about the black image in American Film ? How is Black perception about White in American film? Why was Black always exploited by White in American Film? How about the American film now?

METHODOLOGY

This research was done based on library research and internet exploration. The data was taken from some books, journal, encyclopedia that related with the topic. In the Internet exploration the writer focused some web-site related with the topic. Other sources from non-print material such as television, film and Internet. The collected data was done by selecting, displaying and redacting.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Black Film

In the slave era the mainstream of American Film was overwhelmingly anti-Negro. Black in the film portrayed as simple-minded, superstitious, buffoonish, lazy, and submissive. There were a few exceptions, however notably in the black film *Hallelujah* (1929) and *Stormy Weather* (1943). Black despairing of Hollywood's treatment of their race, for example, *The Birth of Nation* Film, D.W Griffith as director portrays a trusted black servant's self-sacrifice and devotion to his white master during the Civil War.

"In terms of film history, Griffith's opinion and treatment of black is not all that important. But inasmuch as *The Birth of Nation* is quite possibly the single most important film of time, and film that is rarely regarded objectively

because of its racial content.... while difficult, it should be shown in an atmosphere that tries to separate form from content".(Everson 87)

In 1913 black showman William Foster had began making films for black audiences, which followed the model of Hollywood genres but with all-black cast. This initial attempt to establish a viable Black film founded for lack of financial and technical resources.

The Birth of Race (1919) had it origins in a black attempt to answer *The Birth of a Nation*. It was plagued by financial and production problems over a three year period. The black elements in the plot and theme were replaced by more universal ones and the film disappeared after limited initial screenings. Oscar Micheaux was best known black filmmaker of the nineteen twenties and thirties as well as being the most prolific producer of movies using black performers. He made more than twenty silent movies and a number of sound features. Obligated to use a makeshift distribution system, he survived as a viable producer for the best part of two decades throughout his superb ability as a promoter.

The need for black participation in the war effort produced several films which positively acknowledged the role of the black in the American experience. The most notable was *The Negro Soldier* an Army orientation film produced by Frank Capra and directed by Stuart Heisler which was also publicly exhibited by Jo Swerling and Ben Hect to eliminate some of the more militant aspect of the first draft. Despite its celebration of black pride it remains an essentially "Jim Crow" film reflecting the racial separation then practiced by the American Army. (<http://www.mdl.com/classicfilm>).

The nineteen seventies offered brief promise of black genre emerging from the mainstream industry. Films like *Shaft* and *Stars* like Jim Brown seemed to demonstrate that Black could be the Box office outside the ghetto. Black filmmakers like Ossie Davis (*Cotton Comes to Harlem*) and Gordon Parks (*The Learning Tree*, *Shaft*, *Leadbelly*) made films on black themes financed by major production companies. "The

birth of the Black film of the late sixties and early seventies— with Black, by Blacks, and for Black; written, directed, and acted by Blacks (and sometime event produced and financed by Black) " (Monaco 187).

Although a black film of sorts has existed for more than thirty years, the Black Power movement of the late nineteen sixties had seemed to open up a second front in Hollywood, but it was a front that could not be held. By the end of the seventies there were many more blacks in Hollywood, but very few in positions of significant power. The media has validated Black America, appearing on television and in the cinema with some regularity, but rarely in film evincing a genuine black sensibility. As James Monaco said, " Black, in film, as elsewhere have been co-opted, and black aspirations have been trimmed, modified and channeled by the industry to serve its own end" (Monaco 188)

Established white film makers who overlay black stories with a white sensibility, make crossover films like *Lady Sings the Blues* and *Southern Comfort*. Monaco succinctly poses the dilemma faced by a genuine black culture: "How to make a significant contribution to the general culture while at the same time maintaining a separate and thriving Black identity" (Monaco : 193).

Independent Black Film

Independent means that black can build the institution of film without influence by white and black can make film without depends on buy white industry film. The Lincoln Motion Picture was the first Movie Company organized by black film makers, and developed a solid reputation for producing films. Actor Noble Johnson, who served as president of the company, organized Lincoln on May 24, 1916. The first Lincoln production was *Realization of a Negro's Ambition* (1916). The second Lincoln Motion Picture production was *A Trooper of Troop* (1917).

The leading independent black filmmaker, Oscar Micheaux, began making films in 1918 with *The Homesteader* and produced his last film 1940. The heyday of independent black film

production began in 1937 with the first black police drama, *Dark Manhattan*, starring Ralph Cooper. Some of the roles were taken by Hollywood black character actors, including Clarence Muse, Stepin Fetchi, and Nina Mae Mc-Kinney; and some roles were taken by performers with no previous film experiences, including several such as Mantan Moreland, Lena Horne, and Ruby Dee—who later became stars of Hollywood films. Many independent black films featured popular sports and entertainment figures, such as boxer Joe Louis, band leader Cab Calloway, and tap dancer Bill “Bonjangles” Robinson.

Most of the motion pictures of the independent black film industry were made on extremely low budgets and thus most were of poor quality. When the Hollywood studios in the late 1940s began featuring blacks in larger and more positive roles the market for independent black films disappeared. The last such film was made in 1950.

The civil right movement and increasing black awareness in the late nineteen sixties produce some independent black filmmakers, most notably Melvin Van Peebles, who achieved a degree of commercial success. Other like Charles Burnett, Larry Clark, Warrington Hudlin, Robert Gardner and Michele Parkerson have recognition through film festivals and other specialized screenings.

The 1940s saw the occasional breakout from black stereotypes in the Hollywood feature, most often in the different emphasis given to supporting black roles. In the *Ox Bow Incident* a black (sensitively played by Leight Whipper) is one of the few members of the posse who unsuccessfully opposes the lynching of three supposed cattle rustlers who subsequently turn out to be innocent. In *The Set Up*, a young black boxer is one of the few positive characters in a world of white venality and corruption. Hollywood produced a number of features in the late nineteen forties and early fifties including *Pinky*, *Home of the brave* and *Intruder in the Dust*, which made serious attempts to deal with black-white relations.

For the first twenty years of motion picture history most silent films were short—only a few minutes in length. At first a novelty, and then increasingly an art form and literary form, silent films reached greater complexity and length in the early 1910's. The film like *Birth of Nation* (1915) Director D.W. Griffith, *Broken Blossoms* (1919) Director D.W. Griffith and *The Gold Rush* Director (1925) Director Charlie Chaplin, represent the greatest achievements of the silent era, which ended—after years of experimentation in 1929 when a means of recording sound that would be synchronous with the recorded image was discovered. Few silent film were made in the 1930's, with the exception of Charlie Chaplin, whose character of the Tramp perfected expressive physical moves in many short films in the 1910's and 1920s. When the silent era ended, Chaplin refused to go along with sound; instead, he maintained the melodramatic Tramp as his mainstay in *City Lights* (1931) and *Modern Times* (1936). The trademark of Chaplin's Tramp were his ill-fitting suit, floppy over-sized shoes and a bowler hat, and his ever-present cane. A memorable image is Chaplin's Tramp shuffling off, penguin-like, into the sunset and spinning his cane whimsically as he exist. He represented the “little guy,” the underdog, someone who used wit and whimsy to defeat his adversaries.

Although the technology for making movies was invented in 1895, a significant realization of the potential for film as art occurs with the appearance of D.W. Griffith's 1915 full-length epic, *Birth of nation*. In this film Griffith utilized crosscutting (parallel editing) effectively, particularly at climax, when a number of editing tracks play off one another. He also portrayed battle scenes magnificently, with action in one set of shots moving from left to right, while action in another set of shots moves from right to left. But Griffith's work is diminished severely by the overt racism employed in characterizations and plotting and the positive portrayal of the Ku Klux Klan.

American Film in 1960s and 1970s

In 1960s-1970s American film industry accommodated itself to the competition of the world market, to a film audience that had shrunk from 80 million to million weekly, to the tastes of increasingly young and educated audience, and to the new social and sexual value. The Hollywood studios that survived in name (Paramount, Warners, Universal, MGM, Twentieth century-Fox) became primarily office for film distribution, often subsidiaries of huge conglomerates like Coca-Cola or Gulf and western. (Exyclopedia 273)

In this periods, is also signed the beginning of Kennedy as president or the Era of Watergate. Where American film strongly into social criticism such as (*Doctorn Strangelove*, 1963; *The Graduate*, 1967; *Bonnie and Clyde*, 1967; *A Space Odyssey*, 1968; *The Wild Bunch*, 1969; *M*A*S*H**, 1970; *The Godfather*, 1972.) The most successful directors of the periods such as, *Stanley Kubrick Robert Altman, Francis Ford Coppola, Woody Allen, and Arthur Penn* who played most imaginatively with the tool of film communication itself. The new stars of the 1960s and 1970 were *Pul Newman and Robert Redford*. The content of their film, were more offbeat and less glamorous than their predecessors-Robert De Niro, Woody Allen, and Jane Fonda.

American Film Today

Since the late 1970s American Films have reaffirmed some myths of American life and movies. The epics of Steven Spielberg and George Lucas (*The Star Wars* trilogy, 1977-83; *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, 1977; the *Indiana Jones* trilogy, 1981-1989; *E.T. The Exraterrestrial*, 1982) offered an escape from social reality aided by the often beautiful, sometimes awesome effects of visual technology. Darker myths of horror, terror, and irrational menace drove the *Halloween* and *Friday the 13th* series as well as *Alien* (1979), and their sequels and imitator. The *Dirty Harry* series of Clint Eastwood film, as well as the *Rocky* and *Rambo* film of Sylvester Stallone, affirmed the

power of assertive individualism. So, "Today, film is clearly a business,... If studio land is more profitable as real estate than back lot, so be it : sell it off. If the accountants analysis shows the profit margin is markedly grater if, say, \$ 10 million is spent on one blockbuster and its attendant publicity than it would be if spent on ten smaller films, then blockbuster will be made, the smaller films won't. It's not that those smaller films wouldn't have a profit. It's just that they wouldn't have made so great a profit." (Monaco 32)

Since film was used to make money, many Americans industry has changed to industry films. Film used to be industry, its aim was to make films, in other word, as many films was made the profit will be adding. Like Columbia Picture Industries, Fox, has become a conglomerate. So, "Film in America has always been better understood as industry rather than as art. The febrile business atmosphere surrounding movies, the hype and glitter, the cashflow sctructure and balance sheet have been in large part responsible for the vitality for which American movies are known." (Monaco 29)

The film and television industries of the 1990s are virtually indistinguishable. Not only do feature films use television technologies (videotape, video cameras, and video monitors), but every feature film is composed for eventual viewing on television. The conversion of feature films to the VCR has almost totally eliminated Cinema-Scope and other striking technologies—reversing the visual tendency of four decade toward increasingly complex, contrapuntal composition and the emphasis on stylistic values on which the cinema has depended. (Encyclopedia 273)

CONCLUSION

Black does not exist a real people in American film until half a century after the viciously racism, *The Birth of Nation* marked the beginning of feature film. But after fifteen years racist discrimination, the situation already changed, the media has validated Black Americans. They appear in television commercial and on movie screen regularity. Black position

now in the industry American film are better than before. Although still less equal participation with white. The role of Black in American film sometime influences by racism. The position of black in American Film usually appeared as lower class, but Black in American film now rarely exploited by white.

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